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ABSTRACT

This study examined the current perception of meaning and purpose in life among Texas borderland school teachers as measured by the Purpose in Life Test, noting respondents' perceived likelihood of persisting as classroom teachers beyond 5 years given their Purpose in Life Test score. Data from 146 predominantly Hispanic public elementary, middle, and high school teachers from the border region of South Texas indicated that 73 percent of respondents perceived definite meaning and purpose in life, and 83 percent of perceived meaning and purpose in teaching. Most teachers reported looking forward to coming to work each day and viewed teaching as a rewarding profession. Meaning and purpose scores were significantly higher among elementary school teachers than among middle and high school teachers. Teachers reported that commitment to health and happiness was their top priority in life. While teachers reported that their personal and professional lives had meaning and purpose, only 46 percent indicated a desire to remain in the classroom beyond 5 years. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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ED 471 119

# Borderland Teachers' Perceptions of Purpose-in-Life and Persistence in the Classroom

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Abstract

"Purpose-in-Life" and projected persistence in the classroom were examined among 146 public school teachers from the border region of South Texas. Eighty-eight percent of the participants were of Hispanic origin. Teachers' generally reported high levels of meaning and purpose in life, and perceived meaning and purpose in teaching. Meaning and purpose scores were statistically higher among elementary school teachers than middle and high school level teachers' scores. While teachers' reported that their personal and professional lives had meaning and purpose, only 46% indicated a desire to remain in the classroom beyond five years.

Borderland Teachers' Perceptions of "Purpose-in-Life" and Persistence in the Classroom

By the year 2008, labor statisticians predict that 1.7 million secondary school teachers and 1.9 million elementary school teachers will be needed in America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). These growth predictions place public school teachers in the "largest growth rate" category of all occupations in the country. Unfortunately, an alarming number of those who initially enter the classroom experience challenges for which they were unprepared. The resulting void of meaning and purpose in teaching becomes the catalyst for these individuals to seek alternatives outside the classroom.

Non-educators may be unfamiliar with the demands and conditions faced by teachers. Many non-educators cite "summer vacation time" with teaching and lack an appreciation for the challenges that are characteristic of the classroom in contemporary society. Liston (2000) discussed some of these challenges that lead teachers to a sense of despair. Despair is affectively and cognitively linked to a resulting breakdown in the belief that one's chosen profession has meaning and purpose and is therefore worthy of persistence. It is important to note that despair is distinguished from disillusionment. Disillusionment relates to a sense of disheartenment because the real world isn't exactly as it was presented in one's teacher preparation program. The feeling of disillusionment can be overcome and worked through as one retains an overriding sense of meaning and purpose in life. Despair, on the other hand, "entails a sense of doomed foreclosure, one that requires some sort of radical personal and or contextual transformation" (p. 82).

Millicent and Sewell (1999) cited additional examples from the literature that result in despair and "burnout": (a) lack of student motivation, (b) pupil misbehavior,

(c) poor environmental conditions, (d) ineffective school discipline policy, and (e) lack of financial or other professional resources. Miller, Brownell, and Smith (1999) found similar conditions that resulted in special education teachers leaving the classroom. Although not specifically cited, stress from "high stakes" testing could be added to the list along with the growing number of "other duties as assigned."

The challenges noted above are no doubt impacting Texas teachers. Of the 1,041 school districts in Texas, the average experience level is 11.9 years. Further, 45 percent of the teachers employed have been in the classroom less than 10 years. A decline in the number of new teachers in 2000 was also noted and accounted for 7.6 percent of the total for the state. Persistence appears to be greater among high school teachers (M = 12.9 years), followed by elementary school teachers (M = 11.6 years), and middle school teachers with the lowest experience level (M = 10.9 years). Large districts and districts with increasing enrollment are reported to have less experienced faculty and tend to hire new teachers rather than experienced teachers (TEA Snapshot, 2000).

Webb County, Texas has experienced rapid population growth and a concomitant increase in students attending the surrounding public schools. Projections indicate that the demand for qualified teachers in the two largest districts, Laredo ISD (22,524 enrollment) and United ISD (25,627 enrollment), will continue to be great. The turnover rate for these districts is 15.6 percent and 13.2 percent, respectively.

Considering the national, statewide, and local demand for teachers, and the trend toward teacher attrition resulting from a perceived lack of professional purpose-in-life, research and subsequent intervention appears to be warranted. Therefore, the purpose of

this research is to examine (a) current perception of meaning and purpose in life among borderland school teachers as measured by the Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981) and (b) teachers' perceived likelihood of persisting as a classroom teacher beyond five years given their purpose in life test score.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 146 public school teachers from the border region of South Texas. The teachers were categorized into three groups: (1) Elementary School Teachers (n = 59; 40%), (2) Middle School Teachers (n = 42; 29%), and High School Teachers (n = 45; 31%).

In the overall sample, participants ranged in age from 23 to 64 years (M = 36.12, SD = 9.52); 72% were female (n = 105), and 28% were male (n = 41). The majority of the participants were Hispanic (88%, n = 128), with 10% White (n = 15), 1% Black (n = 1), and 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native (n = 1). Regarding marital status, 27% was single, never married (n = 40), 61% married (n = 89), 9% divorced or separated (n = 13), and 3% (n=4) did not respond to the item. Considering religious or spiritual orientation, participants generally indicated "yes, somewhat" (53%, n = 77), "yes, very religious" (39%, n = 57), "no, not at all" (4%, n = 6), and did not respond (4%, n = 4).

### Instruments

The Purpose-in-Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981) was used in this study as it reflects the most widely used and best general measure of the construct (Chamberlain & Zitka, 1988). The test developers describe the instrument as an attitude

scale derived from Logotherapy, a form of existential therapy founded by Frankl (1955). Specifically, the instrument is designed to measure the concept of "existential vacuum," and is appropriate for individuals from young adolescence through adults (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981). The instrument is composed of three parts: Part A contains 20 items rated on a 7-point rating scale (e.g., "Life to me seems": 7 = *always exciting*, 1 = *completely routine;* "Every day is": 7 = *constantly new*, 1 = *exactly the same*; "I have discovered": 7 = *clear-cut goals and a satisfying life purpose*, 1 = *no mission or purpose in life*). The Purpose-in-Life score is obtained by summing the values with higher scores indicating higher perceived meaning and purpose in life. Total raw scores range from zero to 140. Part B consists of 13 incomplete sentences (exp., "My life is _____;" My highest aspiration _____;" "I am accomplishing _____." Part C involved writing a paragraph describing the participant's aims, ambitions, and goals in life and the degree to which progress was being made toward their achievement. Both Part B and Part C were optional. Crumbaugh and Maholick reported split-half (odd-even) reliability of .81 and Spearman-Brown corrected to .90. Initial norms were based on 1,151 participants with 805 characterized as "normal." Construct and criterion validity studies have also been supported using "successful business and professional personnel" that are comparable to the sample used in this study.

A demographic sheet, modeled after the information requested by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Ingels, Thalji, Pulliam, Bartot, & Frankel, 1994), was included to gain information on (a) gender, (b) race/ethnicity, (c) age, (d) marital status,

(e) religiosity, (f) frequency of attending religious services, and (g) an additional item added regarding current teaching level.

Five items, rated on a 5-point rating scale (e.g., "I find a high degree of meaning and purpose in teaching"; "I see myself remaining in the classroom from one to five years."1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree)* were developed to reflect the participants attitudes toward the teaching profession and the likelihood of persisting in the classroom. Items were field-tested for readability and inclusion with a sample of 20 certified teachers who were enrolled in a graduate course in counseling. The general consensus was that questions were clear and appropriate. The items were therefore found to be suitable for the study.

Procedure

Participants from the elementary, middle, and high school groups were given a brief introduction regarding the purpose of the study. This introduction included general information regarding the Purpose-in-Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981) and that their responses reflected general attitudes and perceptions regarding meaning and purpose in life. They were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary and that data collection would be used for research purposes. The participants were informed that no personally identifying information would be included in their responses and that information obtained in the study may be published in scholarly journals or presented at local, state, national, or international conferences. Participants were asked to sign a disclosure statement documenting their consent. Those who agreed to participate were given a copy of the Purpose-in-Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981), the

demographic sheet, and five additional questions regarding their perceived likelihood of remaining as a classroom teacher. The completion time for the three instruments ranged between 10 to 20 minutes.

## Results

### *Descriptive Results*

Frequencies and percentages of all participants, elementary, middle, and high school teacher's perception of purpose in life were calculated. Seventy-three percent of the teachers reported "definite meaning and purpose" (scores above 112), 19% "indecisive" (scores between 92 through 112), and 9% indicated a "lack of meaning and purpose" (scores below 92). Crumbaugh's (1968) norms based on 230 "normal" successful business and professional personnel reported an average score of 118.90 (SD = 11.31). Average purpose in life scores reported across all teachers in the present study was 117.9 (SD = 14.0). These comparisons suggest that the present sample of teachers was statistically similar to the sample selected by Crumbaugh.

In examining cross-tabulations, elementary school teachers (M = 121.71, SD = 9.90) tended to report slightly higher levels of perceived meaning and purpose than did middle school teachers (M = 119.12, SD = 13.72), and middle school teachers more than high school teachers (M = 111.75, SD = 16.90). Table 1 indicates frequencies and percentages for the five additional questions.

Independent samples two-tailed t tests showed that elementary school teachers perceived higher levels of meaning and purpose in life than did high school teachers, t (3.760) = 9.96, $p<.001$. Nonsignificant differences were found between elementary

school teachers and middle school teachers and between middle school and high school teachers. Elementary school teachers also reported that "teaching is a rewarding profession" to a greater degree than did high school teachers, t (-3.186) = -.397, p=.002. Also, significant differences were found between elementary and high school teachers' sense of meaning and purpose specifically in the profession of teaching. Elementary teachers reported more meaning and purpose in the classroom, t (-4.830) = -.771, p<.0001. Nonsignificant differences were found across the three teaching levels on perceived likelihood of remaining in the classroom until retirement.

The optional Parts B and C of the Purpose-in-Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981), was completed by 75% of the participants. Responses tended to be positive and reflected a commitment to "health and happiness" (self and family) as top priories in life. A future orientation to "serve others" was also characteristic of the responses as well as sense of "personal and professional achievement in life" thus far. Most viewed illness and suffering as "obstacles to be overcome" and thoughts of suicide "seldom is an issue to be considered." Participants also reported being "bored when not engaged in learning something new."

## Discussion

The findings of the study, while limited to a relatively small sample of Hispanic teachers in South Texas, appears not to support the national contention that teachers experience a lack of meaning and purpose in life. That is, 73% of the teachers in the Borderland study reported "definite meaning and purpose" in life (in general) and 83% reported finding "meaning and purpose in teaching." Further, 81% claim that they "look

forward to coming to work each day" and 95% see teaching as a rewarding profession." Differences were found, however, between grade level teaching assignment. Elementary teachers reported significantly higher levels of meaning and purpose in teaching and found teaching to be more rewarding than did high school teachers. Elementary teachers also tended to "look forward to coming to work each day" more than did their middle and high school level colleagues. Anecdotal reports from the participants indicate higher levels of support from their community than is found nationally. Further, participants indicated that they had support and encouragement from their family and friends regarding their decision to become teachers. Finally, the optional section of the Purpose-in-Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981), revealed the teachers' commitment to "health and happiness" as their top life priorities. In light of the generally positive results regarding purpose in life, view of teaching as a rewarding profession, and enjoying coming to work each day, one may reasonably conclude that the present sample of teachers would persist in the classroom until retirement, or at least the first five years.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Irrespective of teaching level, only 46% indicated a desire to stay in the classroom beyond five years. These rates are consistent with the high rate of teacher attrition nationally and across Texas, but inconsistent with the notion that one will forecast persisting in a career if one is otherwise satisfied with the nature of the work. In discussing the unsuspected findings of the study with teachers, the general consensus was that "teaching" is inherently rewarding. The increasing number of "non-teaching" duties and demands from increasing the stakes of already high stakes testing has made the profession less than desirable for the long term. Some of the

teachers indicated a desire to remain in education but re-train as school counselors or school administrators. Middle school and high school teachers tended to express interest in school counseling while elementary teachers indicated a preference for assuming administrative posts in the future.

Finally, given the overwhelmingly positive reports of perceived meaning and purpose in life, it is interesting to note the composition of the 13 participants whose scores suggested a "lack of meaning and purpose." Five of the participants were male representing nearly 18% of the male sample. Twelve of the 13 were both Hispanic and married, two considered themselves "very religious" and attended religious services "about once a week." Eight reflected "somewhat religious" views and reported attending religious services "several times a year or less." Nine were high school teachers, and one was elementary. "Lack of meaning and purpose" reporting participants also indicated less favorable perceptions of the school environment. Seven responded "neutral" to the item "I look forward to coming to work." One "strongly disagreed" and one "disagreed" suggesting a relationship between working environment and meaning and purpose. Ironically, 11 of the 13 either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement "teaching is a rewarding profession." Two of the 13 indicated a plan to remain in the classroom until retirement.

These findings are consistent with previous studies citing the high teacher attrition rates (TEA Snapshot, 2000) yet are inconsistent with studies citing teachers' sense of despair and resulting lack of meaning and purpose (Liston, 2000). In addition to the relatively small sample size and predominantly Hispanic composition, a further limitation

of the study is the lack of specificity regarding present years of teaching experience. Also, it is unclear how many of the participants are teaching on deficiency plans versus those traditionally trained and certified. Teachers on deficiency plans may be more likely to be in the classroom as a "temporary fix" while they await jobs for which they are more qualified and interested as a career pursuit.

Further studies related to teacher attrition appear warranted. Certification method, teacher experience, and initial purpose for entering the teaching profession all appear to be necessary components of future studies. It may also be important to determine the future plans of teachers who indicate a desire to leave the classroom. That is, do they anticipate leaving for a support or leadership position within the system? Each of these components will likely need to be addressed if we hope to increase the persistence rate of classroom teachers.

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Table 1

Borderland Teachers' Perceptions

| Teaching Level | Strongly Agree F(%) | Agree F(%) | Neutral F(%) | Disagree F(%) | Strongly Disagree F(%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Statement: "I look forward to coming to work each day."** | | | | | |
| Elementary | 32(51) | 21(38) | 6(30) | 0 | 0 |
| Middle | 15(24) | 18(32) | 6(30) | 2(50) | 0 |
| High School | 16(25) | 17(30) | 8(40) | 2(50) | 0 |
| **Statement: "I find a high degree of meaning and purpose in teaching."** | | | | | |
| Elementary | 33(53) | 23(40) | 1(7) | 0 | 0 |
| Middle | 18(29) | 17(29) | 4(27) | 2(50) | 0 |
| High School | 11(18) | 18(31) | 10(66) | 2(50) | 0 |
| **Statement: "Teaching is a rewarding profession."** | | | | | |
| Elementary | 47(49) | 12(28) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Middle | 24(25) | 15(36) | 2(33) | 1(100) | 0 |
| High School | 25(26) | 15(36) | 4(67) | 0 | 0 |
| **Statement: "I see myself remaining in classroom from one to five years."** | | | | | |
| Elementary | 14(47) | 8(32) | 10(38) | 9(37) | 0 |
| Middle | 6(20) | 7(28) | 7(27) | 7(30) | 0 |
| High School Teachers | 10(33) | 10(40) | 9(35) | 8(33) | 0 |

Table 1 (cont.)

Borderland Teachers' Perceptions

| Teaching Level | Strongly Agree F(%) | Agree F(%) | Neutral F(%) | Disagree F(%) | Strongly Disagree F(%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Statement: "I see myself remaining in the classroom until retirement."** | | | | | |
| Elementary | 17(38) | 9(41) | 14(56) | 10(44) | 0 |
| Middle | 17(38) | 4(18) | 3(12) | 6(26) | 0 |
| High School | 11(24) | 9(41) | 8(32) | 7(30) | 0 |

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